

Russ Russell's ARTICLE

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AA IN PRISON

COURAGE TO TRUST



Finding a sponsor to speak freely and honestly with can sometimes be tricky in prison. Luckily, he found Chuck

I've been an alcoholic since I was 12. I can still vividly remember that first time a beer tasted good. I was transformed from a scared and desperate little boy to a man in charge. That craving would go on to dominate my existence for the next three and a half decades and destroy all that was good in my life. From the time I started drinking I was known for the trouble I caused, trouble that would keep me in prison for over half my adult life. In school I tried hard to let it be known I was a tough guy, not to be messed with. I was expelled for drinking and drug-

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ging and terrorizing other students. Funny just how easy a quart of vodka makes it to delude yourself. I tried to get into high school, but my bad reputation proceeded me. I was told I was not allowed on campus and escorted away. That was the end of school for me.

At 17 I was arrested for "beating up" a mobile home park and was sent to a boy's ranch. I got a family member to smuggle booze inside for me. I tried making "pruno" and gave more than 20 boys food poisoning; that got me sent back to lockup. The day I turned 18 I took a high school proficiency test—which I actually passed!—and I was released from the ranch. Six months later I got married and entered the Army.

Well, a drunken soldier doesn't last, and soon I was given the boot. Now the party was on. Except I was just too drunk to know that it was actually the beginning of the end. My craving for alcohol wouldn't stop. I began to feel shame over my lack of care of my wife and my daughter. I was so desperate not to drink. I would tell myself I was done, that I would get my act together and stop drinking and go to work. Then I'd just go get another 12-pack.

One day my family delegated me to take my Uncle Rick to an AA meeting in Alameda because he had a "drinking problem." I guess I had so many problems no one could tell I had one too! I remember the speaker

at the meeting mentioning a three-day drunk he had. I actually laughed out loud in the meeting. I had been drunk for four years nonstop. Three days seemed funny to me.

The first time I went to prison, I was drinking a 12-pack of beer and a half pint of whiskey a day. When I got out after serving five years, I stayed sober for about three months. Then all of a sudden, I was drinking a fifth a day just to be OK. That's when I started to see I had a serious

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problem. After my second prison term, I managed to hold it together long enough to get a home on a small island in the San Francisco Bay area, a girlfriend (my marriage had ended), a good job and even some credit.

One day I got a call that my ex-wife had been killed. I went and got a pint of vodka and sat at a bus stop and remained there drinking for the next 30 days, only leaving three times, by ambulance, for alcohol

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poisoning. When I finally went back home, the girlfriend was gone and so was I. I put up a "For Sale" sign with an arrow pointing to the front door, sat on the couch drinking as much vodka as possible and sold my home to the lowest bidder.

I knew drinking was going to kill me, but I couldn't stop. As I sat there on the couch, I remembered that just down the street there was a building that held AA meetings. On autopilot it seemed, I got up off the couch and walked over there and went in. I stayed for almost the whole hour, then decided I'd rather just die, so I left. The thought that at least I could stay drunk right up to the end sounded good. I packed a road bag, left my home behind and embraced the idea of just being a homeless drunk.

Of course I ended up back in prison. Now I cared for no one, nothing but my next drink. I traded my family, my children, all self-respect and everything I ever had for booze. I hurt so many people. I awoke in a holding cell, not knowing how I got there. And I didn't even really care. They came at me with a 30-year plea bargain as I was a third-striker. I planned on offing myself soon so didn't care one way or another. I took the 30 years.

This time I had little hope or thought of ever getting out. I spent the first several years studying theology and came to know a God of my understanding. I managed to stay sober more this time, and staying sober

in prison is not easy. Yet I was consumed with shame and guilt. I spent several years in a cycle of dry drunk. I would have a real good week, then nightmares of shame and guilt would hit. I'd then shake it off for a week and repeat. I also had a few relapses during this period. But one thing I never forgot—the constant memory of that AA meeting I went to with my Uncle Rick.

My theology studies began to take a toll on me, so I switched to psychiatry. I got lucky with two good therapists who helped to dispel the shame and make my regret and guilt livable. The nightmares got fewer. Then I relapsed yet again. The whole time this little voice kept telling me that AA is the answer. But I thought I had found an "easier, softer way." I had tried religion, philosophy, psychiatry, yoga, you name it. But the truth was I was just a dry drunk full of ups and downs—mostly downs.

Then one day during a visit to our prison psych ward after the loss of my youngest son, I saw this little magazine on a table. It was a Grapevine. That still, small voice stopped being so quiet. It told me to pick it up! So I did.

Over the next few months, it seemed like everywhere I went in the prison I saw another Grapevine. They were all over the prison if your eyes were opened. I remember reading the words "incomprehensible demoralization" in one of the stories. That

caught my attention. That's what I had known most of my life. Someone got it! Finally I heard that voice telling me it was time to get a home group and a sponsor and work the Steps. So I started going to the AA meetings in the prison. I began reading AA litera-

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ture daily and working the program. Life started to get good. The nightmares stopped. I began to regret the past less and get to know myself for the first time. I felt like I had a life.

I began to ask myself what I understood about God from my experience, not my theology studies. It turns out the two are not the same. My first home group was an intense in-depth Step study in the prison. I spent a whole year in that group and worked the Steps, but on my own, no sponsor. Prison is a very dangerous place. The thought of trusting someone in here to that degree seemed ridiculous.

I ended up being transferred to

the Big Q—San Quentin. Luckily, AA is alive and well here in San Quentin. I found a new home group, a Big Book study group. There I came to love the Big Book. After a few months I was told about a new program for outside sponsorship. I filled out the application.

Two months went by, a few letters were exchanged and then I got a call. I went out to the visiting room and there sat a guy named Chuck. He's now my sponsor and I thank my Higher Power for his presence every day. But at that first visit I still was not convinced that I needed to have a sponsor. We had a long talk.

I told Chuck how I had to break up with my church because of leadership choices the priest had made. Chuck listened oh so kindly, and gave an appropriate tsk as I discussed my horrendous issues. When I finished, he said, "Yeah, that's awful, but you know that's none of your business, right?" Wow. After four decades of nonsense, somebody was finally calling me on my crap! I absolutely knew at that moment my Higher Power had sent me the perfect sponsor. A few visits later I told Chuck the story about my feeble try at that AA meeting in Alameda, the one I left early.

Chuck got a big smile on his face. He told me the story of when he visited that same group in Alameda. He was the guest speaker, and someone there asked him to consider sponsoring someone at San Quentin.

Come on! What a coincidence. I could have sworn I heard my small voice chuckle at my amazement. Even for an old, tough alcoholic convict like me, that was too much. After Chuck left that day, I went back to my cell and I cried. Dear God, how healing those tears were. I felt I had

"come to believe" as never before. Eighteen years later, I had gotten a sponsor from that very AA meeting I had walked out of when I could not ask for help.

Chuck is awesome. I can't imagine a more perfect sponsor. And get this...it turns out Chuck first got so-

ber in Akron, Ohio of all places! I think I might be like a great grandson of Bill W. for goodness sake. Luckily, Chuck still calls me on my nonsense when he should.

I'm shaking my head in awe as I write this story. God is good, and that's my understanding. I've heard

it said, "God looks out for drunks and fools." I reckon Chuck is proof that this old, puke-his-way-through-the-first-pint drunk has double coverage. Came to believe? Kind of hard not to.

ROBERT
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